



Teaching and learning spoken language in the age of artificial intelligence: An analysis of professional practices

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ABSTRACT

This study highlights the difficulties Congolese learners face with oral communication as they enter secondary education. It examines classroom practices and teachers' professional practices when teaching this skill, as well as the content of oral production at secondary level. Drawing on didactic transposition as a theoretical approach – that is, the process of transforming scholarly knowledge into teachable knowledge,

as conceived by Yves Chevallard, and the construction of objects of knowledge into objects of instruction. In short, the aim is to analyse how French teachers approach the teaching of oral production in French as a second language at school level in the age of artificial intelligence.

The data collected from a number of teachers interviewed about their classroom practices reveals that oral skills, as an object of learning, are not taught in most of our schools.

Keywords: oral skills – communication skills – didactic transposition – artificial intelligence.

Introduction

This study concerns the teaching and learning of oral skills. Its aim is to understand the difficulties experienced by final-year secondary school pupils in their oral production. It seems reasonable to examine teaching practices. The aim of learning a foreign language, as we know, remains the acquisition of communication skills. Learners must be able to communicate appropriately in any communicative situation, depending on the context. However, it is now evident that most final-year secondary school pupils in the Democratic Republic of the Congo are expressing themselves increasingly poorly. Their ability to comprehend messages and to speak in interactive or continuous speech situations leaves much to be desired. Whilst the situation regarding written skills among Congolese learners is dire, the situation regarding oral skills is even worse. This is because there is no systematic teaching of oral skills, and exercises designed to familiarise learners with speaking are virtually non-existent. Teachers do not regard oral skills as a subject to be taught but rather as a means of learning, and many of them are reluctant to use artificial intelligence, even though it is a valuable tool for developing oral skills.

1.1. Communication Competence

Introduced by Hymes, the concept of ‘Communication Competence’ refers to the ability to use language appropriately according to the social and cultural context (Hymes: 1972). It is not enough to master the elements of a language and its grammatical rules in order to communicate effectively in that language. ‘*Pass me the salt*’ and ‘*Would you mind passing me the salt?*’ are both requests from a linguistic point of view, but semantically, the first is formulated using the imperative and is considered informal, whilst the second is slightly more polite as it uses the conditional.

One would not use the first phrase in place of the second depending on whether one is speaking to one’s child or to a stranger. Communication competence is therefore the ability of an individual to use the elements of language appropriately depending on the people they are addressing and the context; it is a matter of knowing what to say, to whom, how and in what context.

Being able to communicate in a foreign language therefore involves, as Michael Canale and Merrill Swain (1980) emphasise, four competences:

- Grammatical competence;
- Sociolinguistic competence;
- Discursive competence;
- Strategic competence.

It is useful for foreign language teachers, in their teaching practice, to equip learners not only with linguistic knowledge but also with rules of usage, rules of politeness, and paraverbal and non-verbal elements that accompany linguistic content and contribute to communication.

1.2. Artificial intelligence and the teaching and learning of spoken language

Several studies to date show that foreign language learners who use artificial intelligence tools achieve significantly better results than control group learners. A recent review by Li and Zhao (2005), which surveyed 28 studies conducted between 2020 and 2024, reveals that AI tools were beneficial for foreign language learning as they promoted fluency, confidence and reduced anxiety in oral communication activities. Whilst these new learning tools are valuable for acquiring a firm grasp of grammar, they are, as one might expect, equally valuable for developing oral expression, as they enable – as Sok (2005) points out – interactions, suggestions and, in short, additional opportunities to practise speaking.

With AI, learners can no longer afford to make mistakes. Errors in grammar, spelling, vocabulary and pronunciation are systematically corrected without the teacher’s help. This tool provides sentence templates and the correct pronunciation of words; whether in the classroom or at home, the learner is exposed to speakers who, whilst not real, do use correct language. Rather than discouraging the use of AI, as is currently the case, teachers should encourage its use, as it is a significant aid to the teacher.

According to John McCarthy, regarded as the father of artificial intelligence, AI is defined as: ‘The science and intelligence involved in creating intelligent machines, particularly computer programmes capable of performing tasks that normally require human intelligence.’ Artificial intelligence makes a significant contribution because, by using it, learners discover – without the teacher’s intervention – vocabulary suited to each communicative situation; videos generated by this modern tool influence not only verbal communication but also non-verbal and paraverbal aspects. Its role is therefore both social and functional: social because

learners improve their communication skills, and functional because it is highly practical.

AI-generated videos, for example, are genuine teaching resources that place the learner in real-life communication situations with native speakers and can serve as interfaces for them.

Furthermore, AI helps French teachers to tailor teaching to each learner's level and provides personalised support by offering tools that enable intelligent content curation, as well as other tools such as conversational assistants. It acts as a teaching assistant.

As well as its role in written production – where it helps learners improve their grammar, verb conjugation, syntax, expand their vocabulary and so on, whilst supporting and organising their ideas – it also plays an essential role in oral production, particularly by providing guidance on pronunciation. Claire Kramsch (1993) rightly emphasises that conversational tools can offer learners additional opportunities, as language learning is not limited to the acquisition of linguistic rules; it also involves understanding the cultural context in which that language is used.

AI certainly does not replace the teacher, but it can prove to be an indispensable aid in the acquisition of oral production.

1.3. Teaching oral skills at the final stage of secondary education

In addressing the issue of oral skills, we have chosen the final year of secondary school (Year 3 and Year 4 of the humanities stream) given that, at this stage, learners will have completed twelve years of instruction in French and through French. Their command of spoken French and their oral communication skills should no longer leave anything to be desired. One cannot help but note that today's final-year pupils demonstrate a relative fluency in oral expression, both in terms of vocabulary, syntax and morphology, and, above all, in the coherence and cohesion of a spoken text in relation to the communicative situation.

And for good reason?

Indeed, the New French Curriculum, which has been in force for around ten years, is structured around objectives and is based on the following operational pedagogical objectives concerning oral skills: 'By the end of the speaking exercises and activities, learners will have acquired the ability to express themselves clearly orally, whether in front of an audience, in a working group or during an exchange of views' (Babuda 2004: 28).

The same document goes on to state that learners should be able to:

- Deliver and present a good oral presentation;
- Deliver a good speech or a well-crafted speech for a specific occasion;
- Take an active part in a conversation or debate.

The new French curriculum framework could not be clearer on this point.

At B2 level, oral teaching in the final year should develop the following skills:

- Listening comprehension: I listen and understand;
- Oral expression in interaction: I take part in a conversation;
- Continuous oral expression: I speak.

And to ensure greater success, in terms of content, the NRF suggests the following grammar points: 'Teaching ways of expressing doubt, possibility, eventuality, wish, defence, point of view, feeling ...

In terms of content, the NRF continues, the learner should be able to follow a lively conversation, identify the speaker's tone and mood, comment on plans, join in a conversation that has already begun, initiate a debate (discussion), discuss a problem, state their opinion, recount an experience, put forward hypotheses, express their point of view, and moderate a class debate...

Yet in practice, these activities are neither scheduled nor taught. Learners who demonstrate fluency in this area have acquired it either independently or through practical experience. It is therefore paradoxical that learners should master something they have not been taught.

For a very small group of French teachers who do offer some of these activities, this happens spontaneously.

These are occasional lessons; they regard speaking as a teaching tool rather than a subject in its own right. The presentations given by learners are merely an outlet for the teacher, a means of respite, not an activity with a clear and specific objective. Furthermore, neither the national French curriculum nor the new French reference framework provides an assessment grid for oral skills, which could be seen as undermining the importance of oral skills.

AI also offers linguistic benefits, as it provides feedback on errors in grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and syntax.

In particular, by providing learners with audiovisual tools, AI enables them to practise communication through role-play and simulation – two effective ways of practising communication and developing communication skills. A valuable support for French lessons.

2. Methodological approach

According to the Larousse dictionary (2008), a method is an organised and rational mental process aimed at achieving a particular result. It is the path to be followed to reach a goal.

In this study, the quantitative method seemed appropriate as it involved collecting numerical data from French teachers, analysing it, measuring the variables and testing hypotheses using statistical techniques.

We distributed 20 questionnaires to French teachers in the Kasavubu Educational Sub-Province. The aim was to gather information on the teachers' professional practices and analyse them in order to confirm or refute our hypotheses. Following the questionnaire, we also conducted interviews, the aim of which was to cross-reference the different perspectives of the teachers involved and, above all, to validate the initial information obtained from the questionnaire or during informal discussions amongst French teachers.

3. Results

We would like to point out that the following results are based on the most salient points. These results will be presented according to the sections of the questionnaire. In short, the aim is to measure the similarities and differences between operational objectives and classroom practices in order to identify the causes of the malfunctions observed.

3.1. Use (application) of artificial intelligence

Of the teachers surveyed, none – that is, 0 per cent – make use of the resources provided by artificial intelligence, let alone encourage their learners to use them. The majority rely on traditional resources for oral production, in particular extracts from classical authors.

3.2. Number of hours devoted to oral production

Out of thirty teachers, almost all consider the number of hours devoted to this sub-area to be insignificant. Of the 30 respondents, 21 note that the number of hours allocated to this

sub-branch of French is insufficient, but feel powerless to change this, as the new reforms have reduced French lessons from 5 hours per week to 4 hours. Consequently, there is no way to develop this skill, which is nevertheless essential for pupils' professional lives and crucial to their success at university, particularly for those pursuing studies in the humanities.

3.3. Choice of topics

For the French teachers interviewed, the topics for oral production are mainly drawn from the national curriculum, which dates back more than 20 years, whilst the current context requires a focus on other topical issues that would be of even greater interest to learners. Out of a total of 30, surveyed, only 2 (6.67 per cent) reported that, depending on current events, they sometimes explore other topics. The topics contained in the school curriculum do not arouse as much interest among learners as they are removed from current realities.

3.4 National Curriculum

The current French curriculum in force covers the following topics: People and society, young people and their responsibilities, human activity, moral and cultural values; these are certainly interesting topics capable of boosting the oral production of final-year learners, but they omit other areas of interest that are just as interesting and, above all, more topical, which could create motivation, such as major issues currently trending on social media (scandals, viral stories, etc.) – which, whilst not strictly formal, serve as a pretext for oral production.

3.5. Materials: Choice of materials

Out of 30 teachers, twenty-eight use spoken texts – that is, 93.3 per cent – who rely on authentic materials, which have the advantage of presenting the language as it is in real life, that is to say, featuring real people in real-life situations (extracts from films, speeches and other addresses, and extracts from TV programmes) not only help to hold learners' attention but also present a living language that learners can practise in everyday life. Almost all the rest – 6.67 per cent – use only traditional materials (excerpts from texts taken from anthologies), which are out of step with current realities.

3.6. Assessment grid

During the few sessions dedicated to oral production, a misunderstanding emerges regarding the aspects involved in assessing an oral production session. Teachers' focus is more on verbal (linguistic) aspects. Twenty-two out of thirty

teachers believe that assessment should focus solely on the speaker's language and attitude, whilst eight believe that assessment should also cover pragmatic aspects (coherence) and paraverbal aspects (gestures, facial expressions, body language).

3.7. Oral Genres

For the most part, our survey sample does not make use of so-called conversational genres or interactive situations (interviews, debates, role-plays, etc.), even though these are situations they will encounter on a daily basis.

Only 2 out of 30 teachers have had to set up situations requiring interaction, i.e. 6.67.

3.8. The Objective of Oral Production

Many of the teachers surveyed do not understand the objective assigned to oral expression. For them, this lesson aims to have pupils recite a learnt text or speak without making any mistakes in French, overlooking the fact that, depending on the level of learning, the aim is to enable the learner to express themselves in any communicative situation. The aim of this lesson is rather to enable learners to express themselves effectively and spontaneously in a variety of communicative situations.

3.9. Assessment of oral production

As for the assessment of this activity, the few teachers who devote time to it are at a loss as to how to ensure that its objectives are met, due to the lack of a well-thought-out assessment framework; this assessment focuses solely on the message conveyed by the learner, with no attention paid to non-verbal or paraverbal aspects. The gestures and facial expressions that accompany communication are not taken into account. Teachers rely on observation to assess learners. This is a pedagogically ill-conceived form of assessment in that it is not based on any framework with indicators of success. No use is made of learners' work produced outside the classroom.

3.10. On the management of learning

With regard to the management of learning in oral classes, one observation stands out:

- Confusion between spoken language and written language rendered orally, between speaking to be learnt and speaking for the purpose of learning. According to Garcia-Debanc and Plane (2004:19), the term 'spoken language' – commonly used and

misleading due to its singular form – obscures the variety of ways in which spoken language is realised depending on the context.

- The dominance of the teacher's speech: this desire to control everything and the resulting predominance of the teacher's speech overshadow the learner's speech and hinder any possibility of personal and independent expression. Learners do not have the opportunity to speak for themselves, to express a personal point of view and to justify it.

4. Discussion

In this section, we summarise the research findings and draw conclusions regarding the hypotheses.

These results demonstrate that oral communication, as a subject of learning, is not taught in secondary schools in the DRC, yet this skill is essential for academic success and in working life. It is crucial that stakeholders in the education sector reconsider the importance to be accorded to this aspect of the French language in a country such as the DRC, where French is the official language recognised in the Constitution (18 February 2006) in Article 1, paragraph 7.

Teachers should not hesitate to make use of artificial intelligence tools, as these enable learners to interact with native speakers, thereby helping them to improve their pronunciation and correct their own mistakes. Furthermore, we also recommend the use of audiovisual resources that spark learners' interest, rather than relying solely on spoken texts, most of which deal with topics disconnected from current realities. Excerpts from radio and television programmes, speeches, songs and so on can help to engage learners and serve as valuable resources for improving their oral expression.

When assessing this learning, use recording devices to better address the difficulties learners experience in terms of phonetics, grammar and pragmatics.

To this end, it is necessary to strengthen the initial training of future teachers in the delivery of this subject; we must acknowledge that those in charge of the special teaching units for French are not adequately preparing teachers to teach this sub-discipline. It is inconceivable that, in an environment where there are more teachers trained at Higher Institutes of Education and at the National University of Education, such

misunderstandings should persist. It is widely accepted that teaching practices cannot be transformed without transforming training practices, both initial and continuing.

Conclusion

It is worth noting that, with the advent of new technologies and, above all, artificial intelligence, the teaching of French is no longer the same. French teachers must therefore keep up to date, rethink their approach to their profession and improve their teaching practices.

However, AI cannot replace the teacher but must be seen as a complementary tool. The most important thing is to strike a balance and to know how to integrate it into classroom practice.

Oral skills, reduced to a mere learning tool, are currently not among the skills taught by secondary school French teachers. Text analysis, grammar, essay writing and spelling form the core of the curriculum. French teachers – at least those who devote some of their time to this sub-discipline – do not approach it in accordance with the specific requirements of each type of oral task.

Furthermore, with the advent of new technologies – which are now indispensable – teachers will need to integrate them in order to facilitate their teaching and place the learner at the heart of their learning.

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